

Previous unemployment influences voter turnout, says study

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People who were unemployed in the past are less likely to vote, according to [new Oxford research](#), which shows joblessness can 'scar' electoral participation and even affect political outcomes.

It has long been theorized that unemployment affects the likelihood of electoral participation. But today's study shows that, even those who have experienced unemployment in the past—particularly those who have felt stigmatized by the experience—are more likely to withdraw from the democratic process.

Dr. Leo Azzollini, from the Leverhulme Centre for Demographic Science and the Department of Social Policy and Intervention, who conducted the research, says, "Losing a job, even if you get another one, causes long term scars to [family life](#), health and income. This study shows past unemployment can also determine if someone decides to cast their vote or not—and this affects turnout and [election](#) results."

The study, published in the *European Sociological Review*, shows past job loss reduces the likelihood of voting by 9%, compared to someone who has never been unemployed. The impact of stigma is evident in the research. In an area with low unemployment, this effect widens to 13%, again compared to those who have never been unemployed. Meanwhile, in an area of mass unemployment, the previously unemployed are only 6% less likely to vote than someone who has never been unemployed.

According to the report, "Past unemployment experiences not only shape lasting difficulties in the labor market and in the family, health, and political trust domains but also depress electoral participation."

The report maintains, "The scar effects of unemployment may trigger a circle of cumulative disadvantage over the life course, with socio-economic vulnerabilities shaping political marginality."

Dr. Azzollini explains, "The findings suggest that stigma is key to understanding what is going on. Losing work can scar a person's trust in the political system. But if you lose your job and almost everyone else around you is in work, your self-confidence takes a big knock.

"You consider yourself more alone and withdraw from the collective electoral process. But if you live in a region where many of the people with whom you mix, in the supermarket or pub, are out of work or have been out of work too, you are more likely blame the Government rather than yourself and want to do something about it."

According to the research, this finding can shed light on the results of recent elections in the US, Italy and Britain, "We find that the scar effects of unemployment on electoral participation can be powerful across a range of geographical contexts in Europe. This finding is particularly salient in the context of close elections, when crucial electoral outcomes can be tilted by a few percentage points. These close outcomes include the US Presidential Elections of 2000, 2016, and 2020, the British General Elections of 2017, and the Italian National Elections of 2006 and 2013."

The research suggests the degree of stigma people feel influences whether they vote and can help interpret [election results](#). In 2020, the United States had the highest monthly unemployment rate since the Great Depression—and saw the largest ever election turnout.

Dr. Azzollini hopes the findings will provide an insight for policymakers and politicians into the mind-sets of the electorate. He says, "Past unemployment can trigger a barrage of social and economic disadvantages. It can scar a person's family life, ability to find future work, physical and mental health and trust in politics and politicians. But this research shows for the first time that it's the amount of stigma felt, rather than the actual hardship, which has the biggest effect on election turnout. The greater the stigma, the more likely the withdrawal from the democratic process."

By not casting their vote, the most stigmatized people, who are already cumulatively disadvantaged because of [unemployment](#), risk deeper

entrenched marginalization, according to the research.

More information: Leo Azzollini, The Scar Effects of Unemployment on Electoral Participation: Withdrawal and Mobilization across European Societies, *European Sociological Review* (2021). [DOI: 10.1093/esr/jcab016](https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcab016)

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